

Sermon: Hook, Line, And Sinker

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23

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Our national political scene is an intense and heavy one right now that seems to have so much at stake and is somewhat enthralling, like a slow-motion train wreck. So much is oriented right now to this moment; will this finally be Trump's fall from power as many have been waiting for or will it affirm and cement his power even more which others are apparently determined to see.

And what does it all ultimately have to do with us inside this church on such a Sunday as this? Shouldn't we keep our minds and hearts staid on Jesus, on spiritual things, and leave all the politics outside these doors, let the talking heads and the editorials and the blog posts and tweets fill the cyberspace with their analysis and opinions and predictions in the world out there? Well, I thought leaving politics aside would not be a bad idea and to protect our peaceful holy gathering in here... until I read the scripture for this week: "Jesus went to Capernaum, in the territory of Zebulun and Nephtali" and I was like "uh oh!" and then Matthew quotes from Isaiah and I was like "oh man" and then Jesus says "repent for the kingdom of Caesar... no, the Kingdom of GOD has come near" and I thought "shoot, this is trouble" and then he called fishermen away from their nets to have them "fish for people" and I was like "oh great! We are not going to be able to get away from politics at all on this lovely quiet spiritual Sunday morning!" I'm sorry. Granted these are politics of another time and another place but politics nonetheless and you can thank that troublemaker JESUS for making us go there this morning!

For you see, Jesus really didn't come divorced from the politics of his day and he definitely didn't ignore those who sat in seats of power and he certainly didn't gather disciples together to retreat to the desert and form an insulated apolitical community. Nope. He was flesh and blood, born from the messy womb of Mary, dunked by John the Baptist into the dirty waters of the Jordon and fully immersed into the quagmire of 1st century Palestinian-Roman politics.

As you can imagine, Herod and the Roman Empire, their policies and practices, the economics and politics of that age and that place, weighed heavily and directly upon the lives of the people of Palestine and so factored significantly into what Jesus was doing when he came to the lake shore calling the disciples.

Don't believe Evangelical Christians when they suggest that Jesus calls the disciples to be fishers of men for saving souls for heaven. Cause Jesus is talking quite plainly and quite provocatively about saving people; mind, spirit, body altogether, from a brutal and oppressive Roman social system and inviting them into an alternative vision for how to be and live and relate *in this world!* There are other places in the Gospels, granted few and far between, when Jesus seems to be referring to after life salvation but that's not what he's doing here. He broadcasts "the Kingdom of God is near!" and this is not about believing in him and then being saved from the fires of Hell but rather being re-oriented towards God in the here and now, believing in the ultimate power of God and in that re-oriented life being saved from the body, mind, spirit, tyranny of the Roman Empire!

So let me just break it down for a moment with the help of the Biblical Scholar Ched Myers (*article from January 22nd 2015 in Radical Discipleship; "Let's Catch Some Big Fish! Jesus Call to Discipleship in a World of Injustice"*) so you can hear it all in its

original context. “When Jesus heard that John had been arrested by Herod, Jesus left Nazareth and went to Galilee to a harbor fishing village named Capernaum in” and here Matthew says a thing that gives his listeners pause, “in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.” At the time of Matthew’s writing, Galilee hadn’t been called that for over 700 years when those regions were oppressed and suffering and wrecked under the Assyrian Empire. Matthew’s mentioning of those two names would have immediately brought to mind for his listeners Isaiah’s promise from ancient days that God was about to act in the midst of an evil foreign occupying power to save Israel. So in Matthew’s retelling, Jesus’ entering Galilee was equated with God’s saving act in Israeli history, confronting not Assyria this time but Rome. No disembodied spiritual claim here but a radically political claim of God’s dominion arriving in the little carpenter man Jew walking in sandals for the 3 or 4 days it would have taken him to go from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee.

It was and still is Israel’s largest fresh water lake; about 8 miles wide and 13 miles long, the square miles not all that different from Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. At 209 meters below sea level it is also the lowest lying freshwater lake on earth and lies in a rift valley so it is prone to sudden and violent storms which we hear about occasionally in our scriptures. Fishing was the most prosperous part of the economy of all the region of Galilee – thanks to this body of water - and such places as Bethsaida and Capernaum and Migdal and Tiberius were town and city centers that were focused on the fishing industry.

In 14 CE, when Jesus was likely a teenager, Caesar Augustus died at what was then the ripe old age of 41, and Emperor Tiberius came into power. Herod Antipas, who we hear of in the scripture, the one who beheaded John the Baptist, wanting to garner favor from Tiberius, began building the City of Tiberius on the

western shore of the Sea of Galilee and began making it a lucrative industry city for Rome by restructuring and regulating the fishing on the lake; which meant that the once locally focused industry was turned to exports and in order to export fish the catch would be salted or made into fish sauce for transportation. This of course – like we see in sweat shop factories or even high speed amazon delivery businesses in our own day - benefitted the elite of the Roman Empire at the expense of the laborers. The state controlled the sale of fishing leases so that locals could not fish unless they had special licenses and if they did have a license then their product was taxed heavily, and on top of that there were tolls to be paid for the transporting of it. As you might remember in Mark's Gospel you have Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee and calling Levi the tax collector to be a disciple which is exactly what he was doing, collecting taxes from the fishermen cooperatives of the area. At the time of Jesus' arrival on the scene, local fishermen could hardly sustain themselves and their families on the labor of fishing thanks to Rome's control of their business and they became more and more lowly cogs in a massive system that benefitted the elite of the empire.

Therefore, as Ched Myers suggests, with the oppressive economics of the exporting fishing industry it is hardly surprising, that when Jesus walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and called out to certain fishermen in the boats – “hey come and follow me,” that they simply dropped their nets and followed! Not because of their profound faith or trust in God's purposes for their lives – we soon learn that that wasn't the case at all - but because they were suffocating under the thumb of Rome and anything was going to be better than that.

So Jesus' call to the fishermen wasn't a Billy Graham style altar call claiming some after-life salvation, but more like Gandhi's call to the untouchables in India

to join in the Salt March in protest of British oppressive rule or Martin Luther King's call to the sanitation workers to protest their conditions in Memphis in 1968. All three of them were promoting a different possibility for the social reality of their time; in the face of bleak, unjust, exploitive political and economic systems they offered a vision of human community with dignity, communal sharing and economic justice based not on Roman rule or British rule or American South rule but on God's rule!

And here's also how we know this - Jesus doesn't just ask the disciples to follow him. Because why would they follow this complete and utter stranger? Rather Jesus says "follow me and I'll make you fish for men!" This little phrase is why they dropped their nets. And it is no innocent spiritually abstract phrase about winning people for Jesus, but rather it was a recognizable reference to the words spoke in ancient times by the prophets - Jeremiah, Amos and Ezekiel who all had referenced God fishing for men specifically to catch the BIG FISH elites, the people of privilege who were oppressing and exploiting the poor for their own benefit. The Prophet Amos says that God's gonna go fishin' and "haul the oppressors away like sardines!" And in Ezekiel, check this prophesy out that he levels against Egypt - "This is what the sovereign Lord says: I am against you Pharaoh king of Egypt, you great dragon lying among your streams, You say 'the Nile belongs to me' but I will pull you out from among your streams - hook, line, and sinker - and let you fall on the open field and give you as food to the beasts of the earth and birds of the sky!" Woah. Kind of gives a different edge to Jesus' "I'll make you fisher's of men" doesn't it?!

So there are the fishermen back in the sea of Galilee and this guy is yelling at them - "follow me and I'll make you fishers of men" and they know exactly

what he's saying. These are fightin' words! These are revolutionary words! These are words that suggest an overturning of society where those on the bottom get the justice they deserve and those on the top get their come-up-ance as well! That's why they drop their nets and follow him, because they were sick to death of the heavy yoke and brutalities of the Roman Empire.

And when they followed this revolutionary little sandal-wearing Jew from po-dunk no-wheres-ville Nazareth, they found their lives began to be utterly re-oriented from Caesar to God, from Rome's purposes to Heaven's purposes, from the empire's priorities to Love's priorities. They found that a deeper desire began taking root and shape in their souls and that they were simply no longer so enthralled by the power of Rome and the stardom, the antics, the intrigue of the power holders or whatever Caesar was tweeting that particular day. Rather they were turned toward Jesus and Jesus of course was turned towards God and what was important to God. And what was that, you ask? What was important to God if it wasn't Caesar and the great projects of the Roman Empire? Well, Jesus was a Jew and one of the Psalms that he likely had memorized gives a good account of God's orientation. Listen to it, Psalm 146, and with this I'll end and invite us, like the disciples, to put down our nets and be oriented in this way:

~~I will praise the LORD all my life;~~

~~—I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.~~

³Do not put your trust in princes,

in human beings, who cannot save. (*hear that?*)

⁴When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;

and on that very day their plans come to nothing.

⁵But blessed are those

whose hope is in God,

who is faithful forever. (*and this is where God's focus is*)

⁷God upholds the cause of the oppressed,

God gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free,
and gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
God loves the righteous. *(the honest and upright)*

⁹The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
(these are the priorities of God)
and God frustrates the ways of the wicked.

¹⁰The LORD reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, *(your God, O America)*
for all generations. Amen.